

CMR NWR Community Working Group Meeting Minutes for August 26, 2015 McCone County Fair Grounds, Circle, MT

Bill Milton called the meeting to order at 10:08 am with 53 people in attendance. Each participant was asked to state their name, who they represent, and in just a few words to answer the following question: "In an uncertain world, how do you respond to, and adapt to change?"

Answers varied from people expressing a dislike of change and a desire to move slowly in the face of change, to those who saw change as an opportunity.

Saltcedar Tour Update— 33 people from various backgrounds toured the 7 Blackfoot Drainage to look at a cooperative effort to treat Saltcedar across federal, state and private lands. The effort in the Upper Missouri was brought up and briefly discussed. It was noted that there will be various articles and press releases as well as other tools that will be available to the public to serve as a template for future cooperative efforts.

CMR Water Compact – Paul Santavy updated the group on the previously negotiated CMR Water Compact. The Compact has been through state and federal approval and is now back with the Montana Water Court for final approval. There will be a public comment opportunity and several public hearings before the final decision is made. He stated that nothing has changed since the negotiations were concluded and that this is the last step of the process. Paul noted that in the press release from DNRC there was a misprint of the priority date as 1936 instead of 2015, which has led to some confusion and concern with the process.

Sage Grouse Committee – Bridget reported that the sage grouse sub-committee met at the TNC Matador Ranch on July 16th, and identified 3 priority tasks for the group. The group remains focused on education and outreach and plans to hold 3 community-driven discussions, develop a conservation menu of current available options, and develop a better communication system between the agencies and landowners. When asked what will happen to the group and its work if the sage grouse is listed as endangered, group members responded that the committee is attempting to work on landscape conservation, not just hot topic issues. As a result, products like the conservation menu will be designed to be a living document that will still have value regardless of the listing determination for Greater Sage Grouse.

Bridget explained there are a number of conservation options that provide "assurances" (guarantees from the FWS that no additional conservation measures will be required on private land if the bird is listed). These options will be discussed in the conservation menu, but we currently need lots of input from local landowners on how these programs can be improved and which ones are best at meeting the local needs.

A short discussion followed on the need to have a metric that identifies conservation success and for the USFWS to effectively communicate what the benchmark is to keep sage grouse off the list. However,

these types of metrics do not exist until a listing has actually occurred and a recovery plan is in place. For the decision process, the FWS determines if there is enough conservation activity and enough regulatory certainty this activity will continue, that it will prevent a rangewide population crash. Biologists do have metrics to determine if there is enough regulatory certainty to ameliorate these risks.

Update on the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) – The MSGOT will have their first official meeting on September 18th in Helena. At that meeting the team will set the framework and rules for how they are going to operate. It was pointed out that the Legislature appropriated \$10M for this work, and that there will need to be measurable results from on the ground conservation efforts for further funding to be approved. It was noted that conservation and restoration efforts are often slow and that it is unlikely that sage grouse populations or rangeland health would be able to demonstrate a measurable improvement before 2017.

Lunch Break

Bill introduced Laurie Hanauska-Brown, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, to provide an overview of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Bison Conservation and Management in Montana. Laurie began by providing some information about the purpose of the presentation and the Draft EIS.

The document evaluates broad scale opportunities for bison introduction, not specific locations and includes a “no-action” alternative. Because no specific location is listed, there is no socio-economic analysis included in the EIS.

➤ **Alternatives**

1. No Action – does not continue *this* discussion (does not mean that FWP would quit all discussion as they have bison in Yellowstone Park ect.)
2. Restore a bison herd somewhere on either public lands and or willing private landowners that will allow opportunity for public viewing and hunting.
3. Restore a bison herd on tribal lands for public viewing and hunting.
4. Restore a large herd (400) on a large landscape with minimal livestock interaction.

If an alternative other than “No Action” is selected, then bison would not be moved right away, but it would begin a process of exploring potential locations. This process may be conducted through a proposal system that would identify specific locations, then FWP would move forward with an Environmental Assessment (EA). A decision on the EA to move wildlife would then go to the Wildlife Commission, which would provide further opportunity for public comment. The decision on an alternative will be made by the end of this year and a Final Draft of the EIS will be released with responses to the comments and questions included. There is no other opportunity for public comment on this process following September 11th.

Break Out Group Session

Attendees were divided into 6 groups and asked to answer the following questions in regards to the EIS:

Question 1: *From your perspective, does the EIS address all the concerns that are important to you?*

Question 2: *If your concerns were not addressed, what specific recommendations would you offer to improve the EIS to better include the issues important to you?*

Question 3: *Does the CMR Community working group want to form a bison sub-committee for the purpose of developing a community consensus response addressing the future of Bison in the region? And, if so, do we need to invite the tribes that are now managing Bison in the area?*

The groups were given approximately 45 minutes to discuss these topics, then the large group reconvened and each group shared their results. Below is a compilation of answers derived from the groups.

Question 1: *From your perspective, does the EIS address all the concerns that are important to you?*

General consensus from all groups was no; there are numerous issues not addressed to satisfaction within the EIS.

Question 2: *If your concerns were not addressed, what specific recommendations would you offer to improve the EIS to better include the issues important to you?*

Lack of specifics within the EIS was a major concern with all groups and all felt that it hampered the ability to provide specific comments for improvement.

Failure to identify specific locations for reintroduction resulted in the following concerns:

- Comprehensive economic analysis not possible
- Case-studies not relevant to Montana situations
- Document could have been much more informative and specific if a location had been identified.
- Vagueness contributes to perceived risk which may affect SGI and landowner collaboration on conservation efforts.

Natural resource issues:

- Bison impacts to riparian areas, how will these be addressed without grazing management?
- Missing information on how bison reintroduction would affect BLM permits.
- Case studies do not adequately represent the natural resource impacts of bison, (e.g. riparian areas and year-round grazing impacts).

Containment issues:

- What does containment look like?
- How will movement of other wildlife species be affected by containment?
- How does a contained herd differ from a game farm?
- How big an area is needed to ensure "fair chase"?

- Containment strategy needs to include a detailed plan for addressing these issues, a timeframe for dealing with escaped animals, and a plan for containment when bison are hunted.
- If hunting is going to be allowed, then a statute needs to be in place to define hunter negligence. i.e. If a hunter chases a bison through a fence who is responsible?

Landowner Concerns:

- The importance of landowner buy-in for the success of any program
- Who is responsible for bison damages?
- 72 hours is too long of a grace period for animals outside of containment area.
- Mitigation needs to be in place, but FWP is going to be summoned to each breach of containment. How will this burden be funded as far as game damage and warden time, overtime etc.?

Financial impact/Funding:

- How will the different alternatives impact land use, land values, community impacts?
- Even without a specific location, there could be a more in-depth analysis of the economic risk of disease.
- Indirect costs – landowners attending numerous meetings to defend livelihood instead of working to maintain livelihood. The document needs to address the potential depletion of county resources such as ambulance services and search and rescue teams.
- More definition of how this project will be funded. There is a need for consistent, long-term funding with a clear definition of ownership and responsibility.

Monitoring:

- The document needs to have a schedule and more detailed plan for what will be monitored, who is responsible for monitoring, and how that monitoring information will be shared and used to guide management.
- Is an animal really wild if each individual has to be monitored for disease? Annual testing of wild bison is really not feasible.

Need for Local Support:

- Instead of “community involvement”, the document should include provisions for “community support”. Similarly, “local support” should be as important as “public input” if not more so.
- The EIS should spell out the process for identifying sites with strong local support.
- There should also be a provision for a community to “self-exempt” themselves from being considered a location for bison reintroduction.
- Local government should be involved and consulted, specifically ordinances should not be ignored.

General Comments:

- How can we be certain that public outcry will not stop hunting of a new bison herd, like it has stopped hunting of the Yellowstone bison?
- The document could do a better job of portraying all sides of the issue.
- The “Exit Strategy” should be an Alternative.

Question 3: *Does the CMR Community working group want to form a bison sub-committee for the*

*purpose of developing a community consensus response addressing the future of bison in the region?
 And, if so, do we need to invite the tribes that are now managing bison in the area?*

The general consensus of the groups was that, while an important issue, the formation of a bison sub-committee at this time would be unproductive until a specific location for reintroduction is identified.

Next meeting tentatively scheduled for November 5 in Lewistown.

Closing question – What went well - what did not

Went Well	Did not
Pretty smooth	More time needed for the issues
Very good to discuss the concerns	Needed more room for people – set up
Good diversity	Always letting one side set the agenda on the issue
Great comments and suggestions	
Ability to hear both sides	
Diverse opinions	
Good Relationships	
Relationships lead to on the ground work	
Collaboration	
Respect / Respectfulness	
Being a part of a possible solution	
Agenda/ procedure/ facilitation	
Learned something new	
Having FWP and CMR attend	
Problem solving / solutions	
Informational/ Useful/ Value	
Opportunities to attend	
Information sharing	
Communication	
Share and Listen	